

ACCEPTANCE AND REJECTION: THE TRADITIONAL-HEALER PROPHET AND HIS INTEGRATION OF HEALING METHODS

O. N. Kealotswe

ABSTRACT:

This paper examines the practices of traditional healing and how they are integrated or rejected by the African Independent Churches (AICS) in Botswana. The paper argues that in spite of some doubtful elements of rejection in the AICS, there is a large degree of integration of healing in the AICS in Botswana. The story of this paper is based on a long discussion with a prophet healer who does not have a clear view of his position with respect to integration of healing in the AICS and traditional healing.

1. General Introduction.

The relationship between Christian healing and traditional healing within the AICS, and the extent to which they can or should be integrated is an issue that has long dominated the study of the AICS in Southern Africa. The first comprehensive study of the AICS in South Africa, by Sundkler¹, makes several references to AICS as custodians of traditional culture. Sundkler discusses a number of issues relating to the life of the AICS under the heading “*New wine in old wine skin.*”². His argument is that the AICS can be seen as the rebirth and revitalization of African culture in the guise of Christianity. It is from this attitude that Sundkler argued that the AICS were “*bridges back to paganism.*” In his discussion, Sundkler has observed the following as central elements of the Christianity of the AICS:

*Ancestral spirit and Holy Spirit
Magic and divination
Dreams as means of revelation.*

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss in depth the arguments of Sundkler. In a nutshell, Sundkler argues that the ancestral spirit plays the role of the Holy Spirit, and that the magic and divination of the traditional healer has been replaced by prophecy, with dreams and revelations from the ancestral spirits forming the basis of prophecy. The conclusion reached by Sundkler is that the AICS of the Zionist type are syncretistic in their Christianity. However, the persistence or the constant appeal to traditional religious beliefs and practices by the AICS, led Daneel ³, to introduce a new concept called *transformation*. By transformation, Daneel means that the inclusion of traditional religious beliefs by the AICS in their Christianity has changed the whole meaning of belief in the ancestors.

In many AICS in Zimbabwe and in the Head Mountain of God Apostolic Church in Zion- Botswana, the notion of the ancestral spirit has been so transformed that the spirit of the ancestor becomes that of the Holy Spirit from Jesus Christ. This is based on the understanding that when Jesus left his disciples and ascended into heaven, he said that he would not leave his disciples alone but would send the Holy Spirit to guide them and lead them (LK.24:49). On this understanding, possession by the ancestral spirit is recognized but it is transformed by faith and prayer giving way to the Holy Spirit from Christ who gives the gift of prophecy. If the ancestral spirit does not lead to prophecy, it is thought to disappear and leaves the person sober, without any spiritual possession.

In many cases, AICS argue that they can in fact make a distinction between possession by an ancestral spirit and by the Holy Spirit. The argument is that a person who is possessed by ancestral spirits (*badimo or badzimu*) always keeps his or her eyes closed when in the church, yet sees everybody in the congregation. On the other hand, a person possessed by a demon, *ledemon*, will show movements and excitement which could be interpreted as mental derangement. In traditional Christian theology, demons are understood as fallen angels who disobeyed God after the creation, and who roam the earth to confuse and destroy people. Origen ⁴, associates the demons with the devil. He sees them as disciples of the devil who jointly form the principle of evil. The AICS

also regard demons, *mademona*, as angels of the devil. It is from this basic understanding that the AICS never accepted the attitude of mission- founded churches and the Setswana translation of the New Testament which refers to the demons as *badimo*. In the AICS, *badimo* are ancestral spirits which could at times cause harm to the members of their families if not properly venerated and appeased. The peaceful nature of the person possessed by the *badimo* is the one that makes transformation possible, whilst the demon must be destroyed or expelled from a patient by exorcism. Martin West ⁵, under the heading “*The old and the New*”, discusses how the Zionist type churches have included the recognition of the ancestors in their Christianity. Oosthuizen ⁶, discusses at length the parallels between a diviner and a prophet. Oosthuizen’s most important observation is that:

The AIC prophet fills the vacuum left in the missionary established and directed churches, where none of the church offices compensated realistically for the loss of the diviner, the traditional ‘prophet’, healer, welfare consultant, seer and adviser.⁷

The values attached to the traditional healer in African communities are substituted by the healer-prophet in the AICS. Oosthuizen gives a number of examples and shows how different prophets have different views concerning their relationships with the traditional healers. However, the purpose of this paper is to show how the relationship between the prophet- healer and the traditional healer could contribute to the shaping and development of African Christianity. There are similar stories from all over Africa pointing to the important role played by the ancestors in the lives of the AICS. The two terms commonly used are syncretism or transformation. The concern of this paper is to show how integration and non-integration of traditional Christian and indigenous understanding has been achieved in the AICS.

2. The nature and type of ancestral integration in the AICS.

Before addressing the above problem, it is appropriate to make a simple definition of ancestors, and how ancestors are understood in the AICS.

Mbiti⁸, uses the concept of “spirits” to refer to the ancestors. He distinguishes two classes. Firstly, there are those who departed a long time ago and are not remembered by name or appearance by any of the living members of the family. These are regarded as distant and do not have a direct influence on the immediate life of the family. Secondly, there are the spirits of those who died recently. These have a great influence in the lives of the family. The AICS, however, do not make these distinctions. Ancestors are all respected and the respect is encouraged by the fact that the reading of the Old Testament makes the existence of the more remote ancestors a reality in spite of the temporal distance. Adam and Abraham are as active as more recent ancestors in the lives of the AICS. It is for this reason that many church founders who have died are still highly respected and their past advice has become the law and policy of the church. As a general observation, all the AICS, and even members of the mission- established churches, do believe in the existence and power of the ancestors. Their Christian belief may prevent them from venerating them, but their existence is a reality. This constant presence and influence of the ancestors contribute to the shaping of our present communities.

This paper presents a case study of a prophet- healer who is ambiguous with respect to his position. He serves as an example of many such people in Botswana and Southern Africa.

3. The biography of Dr. O. Batisani.

Doctor Ookeditse Moreri Batisani was born in Gobajango on the 13th of March, 1956. He is a traditional doctor, but does not classify himself as a *sangoma*, in spite of the similarities that exist between him and a *sangoma*. He takes the view that the differences between him and the *sangoma* are several. First, the *sangoma* does some diagnosis of the patients using the *ditaola*(divination bones) or by some other method. Dr. Batisani does not diagnose with bones, but uses sticks to communicate with the *badimo*, who first of all give him the permission to heal the patient. If there is any radical problem, such as the patient being a witch, the ancestors ask him not to attend to the patient.

From early childhood Dr. Batisani became a member of the Jerusalem

Bethsaida Church. In the church he became a prophet. His dead mother approached him in a dream and asked him to ask one of his two elder brothers to become doctors (*dingaka*). When all the three brothers had refused, in 1992, he underwent training as a traditional healer. He qualified as a healer and he is a member of several associations such as the Botswana Dingaka Association, the Dingaka Medical Association and the Hlabazehlukane Traditional Dancers Association of Zimbabwe. He holds membership certificates of the associations, which are recognized by the Botswana Government.

(a) Church affiliation.

Dr. Batisani is still a powerful member of the Jerusalem Bethsaida Church, which has its main branch in Lobatse. When Dr. Batisani goes to church, he has to consult his ancestors first, and he goes only if they give him permission. The reason for asking permission is that the ancestors do not want him to mix his position as a traditional healer and his position as a church prophet. When he goes to church, he becomes a Christian and must be bound by the Bible, but when he is a traditional healer, he listens to his *badimo*, the major one being his own mother.

When the church in Lobatse wished to open a branch at Metsimotlhabe to be led by Dr. Batisani, he declined, on the grounds that he spends a great deal of time attending to patients and may not have time to do the work of the church. In 1985, he was asked in a dream by his mother to go to a place near Gobajango to collect a cord which he could use in church. This is a green cord which he still wears together with his traditional beads and bones. He collected it from a church prophet, whom he did not know since he belonged to a different denomination. When he got to the home of the prophet, the prophet asked him if he had come to collect his cord, then he directed him to a house where he could collect the cord. The cord had already been made because, the prophet claimed, a vision came to him and asked him to make the cord for the person who would come to collect it. It is interesting to note that this cord is put together with the other traditional cords and beads, but he is not allowed to wear it in church. Instead, he has another green and red thick cord

which he wears in the church. He also has a maroon head cover which he wears in church. These two items are kept in his traditional clinic. The church uniform, the Bible, and the *isikhali* (the stick held by men) are kept separately in his main house. They are not supposed to be mixed with the traditional items. On the other hand, when Dr. Batisani goes to meetings at the associations, he wears a piece of cloth of the Botswana Dingaka Association. The argument is that association uniforms do not have any prohibitions because they are not as sacred as the attire worn during the performance of rituals.

(b) Healing practices and beliefs.

Dr. Batisani said that, before 1993, he used to integrate his Christian and traditional healing. But in 1993, he was taken, in a vision to Lentswe la Baratani (a sacred hill of the Balete tribe of Botswana, south of Gaborone). There, he was shown, in a television- like screen, a group of different churches. He was shown all the healing methods of the churches. After that, he was shown various traditional healing methods. He was then asked to separate them but keep them in one place. So, in the clinic of Dr. Batisani, there is a corner where the *diwacho* (placebos) composed of sea water are kept and there is a corner where the *diwacho* of burnt traditional herbs are kept. If a patient from the church comes and does not want to be given traditional herbs, the patient is given *diwacho* of sea water. The reason is that many AICS in Botswana do not want to admit that they do mix traditional herbs with prayer in their healing practices. They claim that people are healed by prayer whilst the use of the *diwacho* is to induce faith since people do not believe in what they cannot see.

There is also an element of competition between the traditional healers and the church prophets. In many cases, conflict exists between the two types of healers. The conflict is caused by the fact that traditional healers had been very influential in Botswana communities .⁹ They were, however, generally, despised by the missionaries and western Christianity. In many cases they were referred to as witch-doctors, a designation which made the traditional doctors very uncomfortable in Botswana until 1972 when the Societies Act was introduced and regulated the

registration of associations and clubs. It is on the basis of this Act that the traditional healers were registered. Registration needed some form of training and qualification. Associations introduced training courses for their members in order to obtain governmental recognition. However, registration did not do much to restore the respect of the traditional healer, whose influence in the community was taken over by the prophets who paraded under the Christian umbrella.

In the early beginnings, the prophets despised and attacked traditional healers and they made a point of their free healing practices as opposed to the expensive healings of traditional healers. It is on this ground that the AIC prophets gained an upper hand in respect in the community¹⁰. The present situation is that the prophet still has an upper hand in respect over the traditional healer who is still an object of suspicion. The conflict continues, with traditional healers claiming that the prophets are “*liars*” who take traditional medicines and heal people with them but pretend to be healing by faith. Christians of mission founded churches feel much more comfortable visiting a prophet than a traditional healer on the understanding that a prophet is a Christian, whereas going to a traditional healer may be thought sinful. The ambivalent position of Dr. Batisani is caused by the fact that he wishes to retain greater respect by separating his two professions. He wants to remain as a pure traditional healer and an ideal church prophet without confusing the two by a formal integration.

A desperate case is one reported by Prof. James Amanze in Rakhuna Village near the southern border of Botswana and South Africa. This is the case of a prophet who does not mix the two forms of healing, but does connect them. His clinic is divided into two compartments. The first one is the church clinic and the inner room is the traditional clinic. When patients come to him, they are diagnosed and treated from the church clinic. If the ailment continues without healing, he goes to the higher powers in the traditional clinic. In other words, this healer believes that the ancestors have more healing powers than Christianity. The prophet has constructed a hierarchy in which he

regards his traditional clinic as a “referral” hospital, similarly to western scientific healing. The two examples given are examples of numerous healers and prophets who find themselves in that position.

4. General evaluations and conclusions.

The two examples given above suggest a very complicated situation. From the above, three positions are observed: integration, transformation and separation. The basic question that arises is what then are the main concerns of African Christianity? Is African Christianity concerned with integration, transformation or separation of two faiths? The following is a helpful preface to the problem. The African Independent Churches (in Botswana)

..... have identified and attend to the greatest spiritual and physical needs of their people and explain many of the practices and doctrines of the church in Tswana cultural terms that are easily understood and most appreciated by Batswana . As a result of this approach to the Christian faith, these churches have developed a form of Christianity that is based on African experiences of human existence as well as the teachings of the universal Church based on Biblical revelation as contained both in the Old and New Testaments. The faith and practice of the Independent Churches in Botswana have given form and content to what I call in this book “African Christianity”. These churches perceive African culture as an ally and not an enemy of the good news of salvation that Christ achieved for all humankind across the ages, cultures and national frontiers. This being the case many African Independent Churches consider it proper that the gospel of Christ must of necessity go through the process of incarnation in African cultures so that it can be indigenous in Africa as it is indigenous in Europe and America.¹¹

It is not the aim of this paper to discuss in detail the implications of this passage. What is important to this paper is the ever emerging theme of

the need to indigenise the Christian gospel and message. This paper argues that indigenisation and transformation are the major needs of African Christianity in general. African Christianity must be based on the world-view of the African. Where there are elements in the world-view which cannot cope with modernity, they need to be transformed. It has been stated above that the AICS have transformed some aspects of African culture through the use of, and appeal to, the Gospel. Transformation here refers to the process whereby traditional beliefs and practices are now being completely understood as being Christian and no elements and aspects of tradition are known and even thought of. When many AICS make offerings of sacrificial animals, they do not do so to appease the ancestors, but to please Jehovah or Yahweh through his Son Jesus Christ. When the ceremony of child-outdooing is done, it is not done to please the *badimo* but to thank God in the name of Jesus Christ. In fact many young people in the AICS do not know that similar practices were originally understood as appeasement or thanksgiving to the ancestors. They have known the practices and rituals from childhood as practices of the church. This is where the argument of Prof. Amanze seems most cogent that African Christianity should be as indigenous as it is in Europe and America. Many African theologians¹² such as Mbiti(1975), Kwesi Dickson(ed.1969), have always pleaded for the adoption, adaptation, and inculturation of the Christian gospel in Africa. However, how this could be done had been rather difficult to suggest until the emergence of the AICS.

Most of the works by African theologians are reactions to the works and attitudes of the former missionaries towards African culture and religious beliefs and practices. Writing about his missionary work amongst the Zulus, Tyler¹³, has titles such as “*Polygamy and other evil practices*”. From his western world-view and Christian experience, polygamy was the worst sin imaginable. He describes it as a great obstacle to the elevation of the Zulus. In actual fact, the aim of Tyler was to change the Zulus from being Zulus to something else whether it would be called Christian or western beings. When discussing the smoking of *dagga* by the Zulus, Tyler¹⁴ has this to say: “So injurious is this practice to body and soul that the most reliable native Christians coincide with

their spiritual guides in the propriety of a church law prohibiting it on penalty of expulsion .” Faced by such resistance, Tyler trusted only in God to change the situation. In the next chapter entitled “*Encouragements*” he says this: “Light began to dissipate heathen darkness. God by visible tokens strengthened our faith.”¹⁵

This attitude of Tyler is typical of the missionaries of this period. This attitude has not ended because in Botswana and Southern Africa and Africa in general, many New Religious Movements, carry the same attitude towards current traditional culture and traditional religious practices. This new Christian colonialism, sponsored from abroad, especially America, is the main cause of hesitancy by some Africans to indigenise the gospel message. Christianity is perpetually being portrayed as a western religion to be understood and experienced in western cultural concepts. There is still a consistent attack on the *badimo* without considering why the *badimo* have remained so important despite modernity and postmodernity. Flanagan ¹⁶ defines modernity as a period where there is very rapid social change which threatens many traditional beliefs especially religion. Postmodernity is defined as a period beyond modernity. It is a period where there is no sense of direction because of the fast changes in the values of people. His central argument is that modernity and postmodernity pose serious problems to religion. This paper takes a different view with regards African Traditional Religious (ATR) beliefs and practices). Modernity and postmodernity do the opposite in as far as ATR is concerned. Many Africans, especially Batswana, have never accepted Christianity as *their* religion. It has always been the religion of the western peoples which they have adopted because of the benefits they could get from it. For this reason, whenever problems arise, the Batswana resort to their traditional religious beliefs and practices. This takes the guise of going to AIC prophets or secretly visiting traditional healers. Modern social problems, diseases and other ailments are still solved by traditional methods.

It is arguable that Dr. Batisani should be encouraged to stand firm and declare clearly that his ancestors are to be part of the Christian community. It should be made clear that his healing methods are derived from both religions, the traditional and Christian. In other words his healing methods should be indigenous. As a general observation, the AICS have done and gone a long way to indigenise Christianity, and they have to stand firm and promote their theologies. There is no need to be ashamed of healing from both the Christian and ancestral spirits because in the argument of Philo of Alexandria¹⁷, concerning philosophy, all truth comes from one God and Jesus Christ is the final revelation of God on which everything is derived and finds its basis.

As a word of conclusion, three standpoints have been identified. These are: integration of the two religious systems, separation of the two systems and working together in a hierarchical structure. This paper supports the integration model, which to a large extent, is the most popular. It is only through this type of integration that a truly African Christianity could be born. Dr. Batisani and others would appear to be examples of how the integration model can function effectively within the African context. They need not to be apologetic about it, but rather to promote it.

NOTES

- 1 Bantu Prophets was the first comprehensive study of the AICS in South Africa .
- 2 Bantu Prophets pages 238-239.
- 3 The Rise of the Southern Shona Independent Churches, was the first comprehensive study of the AICS in present Zimbabwe .
- 4 History of Christian Thought, page 228.
- 5 Bishops and Prophets pages 171-189 .
- 6 The Healer Prophet pages 166-193.
- 7 The Healer Prophet page 165.
- 8 This is one of the most comprehensive studies on African Traditional Religions.
- 9 This is the most comprehensible study of the customs and traditions of the Batswana.
- 10 The book is a focused study on an African Independent church leader and prophet.
- 11 African Christianity (xiii).
- 12 The emphasis by many African theologians is the need for the indigenization of Christianity.
- 13 The work of Tyler amongst the Zulus is one of the clear examples of how ignorance of African customs and values makes Christianity to fail to attract the Africans .
- 14 Forty Years Amongst the Zulus page 123.
- 15 Forty Years Amongst the Zulus page 126.
- 16 Post- Modernity (1988), summarized by the author.
- 17 History of Christian Thought pages 42-44.

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